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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000460

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SUBJECT: LICKING ITS WOUNDS: MALI REGROUPS, HOSTAGE RELEASED

REF: BAMAKO 383

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Peter Barlerin, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: Nine days after the ambush of Malian forces by AQIM fighters north of Timbuktu, uncertainty remains concerning the exact number of casualties and the condition in which the bodies of the dead were left on the field. The most reliable indications are that 28 Malian soldiers were killed in the July 4 ambush, with six additional soldiers captured and now held hostage by AQIM. Lieutenant Colonel Hamma Ould Mohamed Yahya has been confirmed dead, and the Malian army has for the moment pulled its forces back to the relative safety of Timbuktu. A delegation from AFRICOM accompanied by the Embassy's DATT visited the Malian forward operating base at Tessalit, and witnessed firsthand the harsh operating conditions facing the Malian army in the north. The government newspaper L'Essor, for its part, has largely ignored the AQIM debacle, relegating the incident to a few short paragraphs in its July 6 and 7 editions. Meanwhile, on Sunday, July 12, AQIM released the last remaining western tourist held hostage since January 22 by the group. End Summary.

The Casualties

2.(C) Six days after the deadly ambush of Malian military forces by fighters from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), there remains uncertainty concerning the exact number of soldiers involved and casualties sustained by government forces. Numerous sources now report the number of dead on the government side at 28, and the weight of speculation places the number of captured soldiers now held hostage by AQIM at six, including three Berabiche Arab militiamen and three soldiers of southern Malian origin. The generally accurate website kidal.info has reported that the Malian government has sent a delegation to begin negotiations with AQIM for the release of the hostages.

3.(C) Numerous sources now confirm the death of Lieutenant Colonel Hamma Ould Mohamed Yahya, the cousin of the late Colonel Lamana, who was assassinated on June 10 (ref). Colonel Hamma was in command of the Malian forces involved in the ambush, a mixed unit comprising Berabiche Arab militiamen and Malian regulars. At the current time, it is unclear whether Colonel Hamma was executed, or if he died from wounds received in the ambush. Reports that his body was found two kilometers from the site of the battle suggest that his death was not immediate and that his body may have been deposited there after he died in captivity. Further obscuring matters is Colonel Hamma's complicated relationship with AQIM. Like Lamana, Colonel Hamma is widely known to have been engaged in questionable business dealings with AQIM.

4.(C) Having suffered its greatest casualties since 1991, the

Malian military suspended patrols in the area of the battle, temporarily withdrawing its forces to the relative safety of Timbuktu. While no official announcement has been made, the move is likely an attempt to regroup and assess the extent of the army's damages. The Malian government may also be attempting to secure assistance from its partners before reengaging AQIM.

A Trip to Tessalit - Atrocious Conditions

5.(C) From July 7 to July 8, a delegation from AFRICOM visited Malian bases in Gao, Tessalit, and Sevare (near Mopti). Accompanied by the Embassy's Defense Attache, the delegation conducted an assessment of the Malian army's capabilities and needs in the ongoing struggle against AQIM. At Tessalit, the forward operating base for Mali's operations against AQIM along the Algerian border (including the area of Temetrine), the delegation observed a woeful shortage of basic supplies and logistical support. Roughly one half of the base was deployed on patrol against AQIM, which left the Tessalit base with only three operational vehicles, including two pick-up trucks and one minivan. The base is equipped with two truck-sized diesel generators, which provide electricity for only two hours a day. The delegation was shown the stocks of weapons and ammunition on hand, much of which dated from the 1960s. The runway, outlined by vehicle tires serving as markers, was cracked and in bad disrepair. The base, desperately isolated, is surrounded by open but gravelly desert with rough mountainous terrain along the horizon. The temperature in the shade during the

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delegation's visit was reportedly 112 to 115 degrees fahrenheit.

6.(C) Living conditions on the base are equally harsh. Meals for the troops consist of sandy rice with bean sauce. Meat is extraordinarily hard to come by. Although there is a doctor on the base, there are few bandages or basic medical supplies. Medical evacuation, when required, takes two days by vehicle to Gao. For this reason, a major priority for the commander of the Tessalit base is acquiring an ambulance to evacuate the wounded. Conditions on deployment are considerably worse. Lacking shelter, the troops sleep under their vehicles, and often run short of drinking water. Despite the inadequacy of supply and the difficulty of the environment, the delegation reported that the Malian troops and commanders remain determined in the fight against AQIM, and are more than willing to engage AQIM if they are properly equipped.

Government Press Silent

7.(C) To date, the Malian government has remained largely silent about the July 4 attack. On July 6, L'Essor, the government newspaper, carried a one paragraph story on page 16, noting only that a "skirmish" had occurred while the Malian Army "pursued" its offensive against AQIM. The following day, a four paragraph article on page four acknowledged that the combat had been "very very hard," but claimed no knowledge of casualty figures. Since July 7, the Malian government newspaper has carried no information about the attack.

8.(C) By contrast, the opposition newspaper Le Republicain published a blistering editorial on July 10, noting that Mali was "playing the game" of western powers who were "notable in their absence at the moment of truth." Lamenting that Mali was becoming "a vast battlefield of titans between the powerful Al Qaeda and the great powers of the international community," Le Republicain appeared to tap into the minority of Malian public opinion that feels Mali does not have a

stake in the battle against AQIM.

Swiss Hostage Released

9.(C) On Sunday, July 12, AQIM released the Swiss tourist Werner Greiner. Greiner was the last of four European tourists taken hostage by AQIM in January 2009. Recent reports, citing the observations of a Malian elected official involved in negotiations for Greiner's release, had indicated that Greiner's health was rapidly deteriorating in the weeks leading up to his release. Negotiations had taken place on several tracks, and at least one Embassy source suggested that three of the Malian soldiers taken captive on July 4 may have been released with the Swiss tourist as part of a package agreement. This has not been confirmed, however, and officials are, as usual, denying that any ransom was paid.

Comment: Mali on a Limb

¶10. (C) The July 4 attack inflicted the largest number of casualties on the Malian military since the Tuareg rebellion of 1991. The military appears momentarily stymied, and the July 4 attack clearly demonstrated the army's weakness against a better equipped and more mobile enemy. Press coverage this week has focused as much on the lack of Western support for the government operations against Al Qaeda as on the battle itself, while the silence of the government newspaper L'Essor suggests the government is still considering how to play this incident in public.
BARLERIN